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ABSTRACT

This investigation compared courtship patterns and early marital adjustment in a sample of 30 white middle class couples, slightly less than half of whom had lived together prior to marriage. Intensive interviews were conducted individually and conjointly with all couples at specified intervals prior to and following marriage. Interviews were content-coded and analyzed with respect to the identification and description of emergent styles of early adjustment for "traditional" and "nontraditionals." Findings and implications relative to the degree of role transition and conflict experienced by the groups was discussed. (Author)

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TRANSITION TO MARRIAGE

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL COURTSHIP PATTERNS ON EARLY MARITAL ADJUSTMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that alternate marriage forms such as communal living and cohabitation prior to marriage gained notoriety during the late sixties and early seventies, very little research has actually been conducted and published in the literature describing these life styles or the kinds or individuals who opt for something other than the traditional "dating-engagement-marriage" pattern.

In an effort to gather descriptive data of this nature and to facilitate beginning comparisons between courtship patterns and early marital adjustment, in depth interviews were conducted with thirty white middle class couples. Slightly less than half of the couples had lived together for varying lengths of time prior to marriage and were labeled "nontraditional." Both groups were interviewed at each of the following times: six months prior to marriage; three, six and nine months after marriage. Couples were generally matched for age and educational level. All women worked, full or part-time, but denied identifying themselves as "career women." Question was whether the early marital adjustment for couples who had not lived together would involve a greater role transition and thus greater conflict and stress than that experienced by those who did live together.

TRADITIONAL STYLES

Overall, a slightly higher amount of stress was reported by this group through out the first year of marriage. The first three months were seen as being highly conflictual with the central adjustments related to redefinition of self, other and marriage, and redefinition of relationships with family and friends. Every couple mentioned the myriad of little things needing resolution:

where to squeeze the toothpaste; how to find a comfortable temperature in the house. Several reported elaborate disagreements over such things as who is responsible to set the alarm or the aggressive sleeping habits of the other. Becoming aware of new personality characteristics seemed particularly troublesome for all couples:

He: I think she's a different person now. I'm aggravated in some ways that I married this person and now a couple of months later, she's different.

She: Girls do it, when trying to get someone they do a lot of things. It's kind of a game, but I really didn't know I was playing. Before I was trying to please him. Now I'm more relaxed and not constantly asking how do you want this done.

The division of labor tended to be traditional with task allocation the woman's responsibility. Negotiations around role differentiation operated essentially on a covert lend; as in other areas, a definite carry-over from the premarital style of interaction.

By the end of the first year, there was a reported reduction in stress and a beginning ability to verbalize change in the marital process.

"We are getting to know each other better and getting a personality as a couple. We kinda accept each other's likes and dislikes and just go our own way."

The degree of experienced stress was found to be most related to duration of the relationship and agreement between premarital expectations and postmarital reality. Those couples who had known each other the longest, discussed differences more frequently, had expected disagreements prior to mar-

rying, and reported a smoother adjustment to marriage.

NONTRADITIONAL STYLES

For each of these couples, cohabitation was a mutually exclusive, complete process that served the purpose of a "trial marriage." Nowhere in the description of this time of living together did the changes for each individual sound atypical of those described by the traditional newlyweds. Most of the couples tried to share household responsibility with the specifics of work allocation poorly defined, and seldom overtly negotiated. Setting up housekeeping and maintaining the arrangement as newlyweds represented a trial and error process. Contrary to the implicit decision to live together and then to marry, all couples were clear in agreeing that the act of marriage itself, made little if any difference in their relationship. One couple even felt that the reason their marriage was "working" was precisely because they did not let "being married" change the way they related to each other. As one woman put it, "Marriage is a nice formality, but no difference."

Nevertheless, there were differences between groups in reported adjustments with marriage. This group claimed less stress with in-laws and less time devoted to conflict management. By way of contrast, the informal to absent negotiation processes appeared to foster a flexible adjustment rather than to impede task completion. Task allocation for these couples seemed more clearly contingent upon one's level of skill and personal preference, and less so upon automatic division on the basis of sex.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

An over-riding theme for both groups centered around the centrality of the woman to initiate and maintain the parameters and the apparent quality of the marital relationship, particularly among the nontraditional women. All wives expressed expectations for husband's behavior and registered dissatisfaction, particularly with sexual relationships. Other complaints ranged from expecting him to "always keep things from becoming boring" to demanding he be "more forceful with me and his family." The universal unfulfilled expectation of the women was that their husbands be "more open with feelings." Other difficulties were found to be a funciton of the role interface "worker-spouse," again verbalized only by the women. Such a phenomenon can be interpreted as being related to the absence of verbal negotiations which characterized this period. A good summary statement of the husband's attitude was, "I don't expect much; that way I'm never disappointed."

For both groups, it appeared that the process of actually setting up housekeeping with another person constitutes the greatest change and adjustment. Couples referred to such values of living together as "knowing what the other person is like 24 hours a day, not just 10," or "working out your disagreements and finding if you're sexually compatible." Such views lend credence to Montgomery's (1973)*suggestion that living together represents an alternate courtship form rather than a parallel to traditional marriage. As with Montgomery's couples, these couples saw living together as a temporary part of a permanent relationship, despite the fact that this was not clearly articulated prior to the decision to live together. The kind of

*Montgomery, Jason P. Toward an Understanding of Cohabitation. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1973.

relationship that stems from living together was, for these couples at least, quite similar to that prrsued by those without the benefit or prior cohabitation. It can be said in a very broad, overall sense that the traditional couples began to look more and more like their nontraditional counterparts the longer they were married. In other words, the traditionals at one year were most like the nontraditionals when the latter begin marriage.

KS/jl
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